

Notes from Wahroonga, Sydney, N.S.W.

By H. WOLSTENHOLME, R.A.O.U.

These notes are from observations of birds at Wahroonga, a North-Shore-line suburb, 12 miles from Sydney. They were made in the garden (or within 100 yards round it), largely from the verandah, which has trees and shrubs close by and a small bathing pool, hollowed out of a flat piece of sandstone, a few steps away in the shade of an apple tree. On three sides is almost virgin bush, with small areas here and there of tall eucalyptus, left by the timber-getters of last century and still happily untouched by the ruthless hand of civilisation. All the country north of the North Shore railway suburbs consists of the Hawkesbury sandstone formation, usually hard and rocky, sterile in appearance, and supporting its characteristic flora of Banksias, Boronias, Heath (*Epacris*), Apple-tree (*Angophora*), etc., etc., that Honeyeaters love, and where the shy Ground-Wren (*Hylacola pyrrhopygia*) may sometimes be seen. The land falls away into gullies which are studded and flanked with irregular masses of weathered and waterworn sandstone, and grow deeper and wider as their streams wind away to the salt waters of Cowan Creek or Middle Harbour—plenty of cracks and caves for the Rock Warbler (*Origma rubricata*), and thick scrub and undergrowth in places for the Whip-Bird (*Psophodes olivaceus*) and the Lyre-Bird (*Menura nova-hollandia*).

There would be 100 or more bush birds about these suburbs on their northern side, beginning at Roseville, six miles from Sydney, and it is a matter of surprise and regret that, with this amount of interesting bird-life close to a city, there seem to be so few individuals that go out among the birds and hear and see them in their native haunts.

Eurystomus orientalis. Dollar Bird or Australian Roller.—Very common in summer, small parties taking up a position in high trees, preferably on dead branches and doing short flying stunts to and fro as though practising or “showing off,” perhaps catching insects at the same time, to an accompaniment of rough, hoarse notes from both performers and spectators. Good glasses are needed to appreciate their varied hues. They rarely come down low.

Eurostopodus mystacalis. White-throated Nightjar.—At nightfall every fine evening in April one was to be seen in continuous strong and graceful flight of sweeping curves about the tops of the tall eucalyptus. Once only (April 16th) were two birds seen at the same time, when it was too dark to identify the species.

Eudynamys orientalis. Koel.—Unmistakable “cooees” were heard on two summer evenings, and a few nights later (January 14th) a bird came into the tall trees in the back paddock and “cooeed” several times. The birds have not been actually seen here, but have frequently been seen nearer the coast at Pittwater, about 8 miles away as the Crow flies.

Microeca fascians. Australian Brown Fly-catcher.—Jacky Winters are very common indeed and great favourites. They have no

bright plumage to please the eye, but are so lively, friendly, and useful, and such sweet songsters in the warmer months; frequent companions to the gardener (but often in high timber, where their song is usually given), alighting familiarly round about on twig or post, and flicking the white-edged tail to this side and that side. Quiet and trustful, alert and wistful, gentle, yet they are marvellously quick. If a morsel is dropped it will be caught in the beak before falling 6 inches. On good terms with all other birds with the exception of Cuckoos. Rather silent through the cool months, but they give prolonged "Peter Peters" in a variety of sweet tones and modulations in spring. Their chorus at dawn on a fine spring morning is glorious—a daily joy to the early riser in these parts. We feed some every day by tossing up little bits of cheese to be caught in mid-air—a natural way for fly-catchers to obtain food—and they take them most wonderfully with the greatest ease. A few posts close to the verandah are for their special use. In the garden they will alight just at hand or hover above one's head, asking for a morsel to be thrown to them. Their shallow little nests, though so small and hard to see, may be found easily by watching the birds. Their were four last season within 70 yards along the road by the gate. Usually they are in a big eucalyptus and frequently are quite low.

Gerygone albogularis. Bush-Warbler.—Plentiful. This little migrant fly-eater is here from spring to autumn. It is sometimes called the "Native Canary," having its breast a light canary colour, and possessing a beautiful song—a cascade of light liquid notes ending with a staccato note not always heard. It lives chiefly aloft in the big gums. The nest is of the Tit-Warbler (*Acanthiza*) type, very elongated, with a hooded entrance and a long tail.

Eopsaltria australis. Shrike-Robin.—Very common indeed, and, like the Jacky Winter, most attractive, but very different. It is heavier, slower, more deliberate, often eyeing a piece of food for quite a little time before hopping down to it. Does not hover, and moves about silently in thick, scrubby and shaded parts (perhaps its large eye is to assist the sight in these places). Here one is almost sure to be seen in its well-known position, clinging diagonally to the vertical stem of a small tree, and never far from the ground. Some are usually in the garden. First to wake and last to sleep, their gentle and regular one-note whistle is (along with the boisterous laugh of the Kookaburra) the earliest of bird-notes at day-break, and the latest at nightfall, but throughout the day it is not so much heard. The strong "Tchoo Tchoo" is given in the nesting season only.

Some of the birds are tame—friends of all the household—and take cheese perching on our hands. Two were given names—"Cheeky" and "Stumpy," he was minus his outer tail feathers for a while. Trustful, unassuming and peaceful by general repute, and rightly so, yet, at times, quite otherwise. If food is being distributed, they are very jealous of the Jackies and try to keep them away, and occasionally they fight amongst themselves. At the bathing pool Robin is selfish and exclusive. A Sparrow is usually there. If Robin wants to go in, he just jumps at the Sparrow. Sparrow as a rule goes; if not, Robin jumps on him, and, applying his beak effectively, has the bath to himself. He objects to strangers, and rudely drives off Redheads (*Acgintha temporalis*) or other small birds. The nests about here are a uniform height, about 8 feet from the ground.

Falcunculus frontatus. Shrike-Tit.—Very numerous. Their queer chuckle or slow whistle is constantly heard in the eucalyptus trees. Young birds were often fed in the orange trees. In the quiet of the bush the presence of these fine birds is sometimes discovered by the crackling noise made in breaking and pulling away bits of dead

bark with their powerful mandibles, as they search for their insect food. At the bath one will flop down suddenly, causing a scare and a scurrying away of the bathers as though he were a Butcher-Bird. He will splash about energetically, looking very alert and more handsome than usual with crest and tail spread—formidable, no doubt, to the smaller birds that do not venture near while he is in possession. A pair nested at the extreme top—70 feet high—of a lanky blackbutt near the fence.

Pachycephala rufiventris. Rufous-breasted Whistler.—These great songsters may be heard in all directions in spring and summer, except during a kind of midday siesta on hot days. Most of them go north in the autumn. They have many melodious notes. The chief one is heard at its best in the mating season, when the males are in competition with one another, and in their excitement at this time they have a curious habit of bowing or bobbing their bodies up and down. This note is a rapid and confused blending of rich and resonant melody impossible to imitate. It is heard, too, when the nest is being made. The female bird attends to this, but whether she goes some distance away collecting material or whether she is at the nest arranging it, the male bird is never very far from her, making the bush resound with his approving outbursts and joyous song. That is his only assistance. But it must be recorded that later on he takes a turn sitting on the eggs, which many male birds do not.

Other pleasing notes are the leisurely "Echews" and the short whip-like notes. Then there is the loud single piping note oft repeated—so many times frequently that one wonders when it will cease. When this is given it follows at the end of the commonest call. Any sudden noise such as the report of a gun, a clap of thunder, blast at a quarry, always startles these birds into song. The female is not seen as often as the male, and has not his bright colours or fine notes.

Pachycephala gutturalis. Yellow-breasted Whistler.—These are plentiful, but not so common as the Rufous-breasted. They prefer the scrubs and brushes of the gullies. A more handsome bird to look at, but an inferior songster, though he has some fine calls—one that is reminiscent of the well-known note of the Grey-Shrike Thrush (*Colluricincla harmonica*) and one with a whip-like swish at the end. The Whistlers are particularly fond of caterpillars, and may frequently be seen in the trees pulling out quite large ones from under the bark. One female bird used to come about the verandah and take bits of cheese that were thrown down. Its plumage is darker than that of the female *rufiventris*, and has a green tinge. The nest of the yellow bird is more solid than that of the rufous bird, and, speaking generally, is nearer the ground.

Rhipidura flabellifera. White-shafted Fantail.—Very numerous. Fearless and inquisitive (yet in a shy kind of way), fussy and restless as a Honeyeater, the peculiar little whistle may be heard all through the day in the nesting season, as they hop and flit about in the scrub and trees. Very quick and active in pursuit of flying insects, they dart or dive suddenly in any direction, making the flight sometimes appear jerky. Nests about here are very low—some only 2 feet from the ground.

Rhipidura rufifrons. Rufous-fronted Fantail.—Not nearly so numerous; but they frequently come up from the gullies to the gardens and are sometimes seen hopping about in company with the White-shafted. They are similar in habit to the white-shafted species, but more beautiful in appearance—a study in rufous shades.

Seisura inquieta. Restless Fly-catcher.—The Scissor-grinder is plentiful—a fine and interesting bird to observe with its lustrous

dark-blue (not black) head, on which the feathers can be erected into a little crest, and its under parts pure white except for a slight wash of rufous on the chest of the female. It calls so sweetly (though, perhaps, holding the while a large moth in its beak), "Tu whee, tu whee" high in the gums or on a telephone post, and gives the grating, grinding notes lower down among the fruit trees and vegetables. Close to the ground it flies along very slowly, and at times hovers as it searches the ground for insects and spiders, suddenly, maybe, dropping down on to them like a Kookaburra on to a mouse. In hovering it gets its body and tail into a more vertical position than Jacky Winter, and its head seems more pointed to the ground. The scissor-grinding sound ends with notes at a higher pitch than those at the beginning. This effect is produced by opening the mandibles wide. It does not nest low and near houses like its relative, the Willie Wagtail Fantail (*Rhipidura leucophrys*), but usually high in a eucalyptus.

Myiagra rubecula. Leaden Fly-catcher.—Not plentiful; but birds are to be heard and seen now and then in the high timber, never about the garden. The tail is not held up like that of the Fantails, but sometimes shows a slight quivering or trembling movement when the bird is at rest. The female differs from the male in having throat and breast rufous, which in the male are of a greeny-blackish colour.

Monarcha carinata. Black-faced Fly-catcher.—Not common. "Why-you, which-you," heard two or three times, revealed the presence of two birds in a thick Pittosporum (*P. undulatum*) on February 17th. They are singular looking birds as though wearing a black mask, the face and throat being in such contrast to the grey upper and rufous under parts. Odd ones also were seen on a few other occasions—one with face and throat grey looked commonplace in comparison with the black-faced birds. This was a female or immature male. They keep in thick brush country as a rule.

Psophodes olivaceus. Whip-Bird.—Fairly common a little way off, where there is thick undergrowth in the gullies. They come up to the shrubberies in the warmer months, and may then be frequently seen and heard near the ground among thick umbrageous shrubs in the gardens that border on the bush. They are very shy.

Acanthizae. Tit-Warblers.—These lively and most useful little birds are very numerous in small flocks. About the ground, often among the vegetables and flowering plants, may be seen parties of *A. chrysorrhoa* (Yellow-tailed), and less often *A. reguloides* (Buff-tailed), active and busy feeding on aphids and other insect pests, and showing their yellow or buff upper tail coverts as they flit from place to place.

Going through tree after tree (particularly Acacias) in little companies, the Little (*A. nana*) and Striated (*A. lineata*) may be distinguished, hard at work devouring insects. *A. pusilla* (Brown), darker, and with spotted chest, is not so common; keeps more to the bush.

Mahurus cyaneus Blue Wren-Warbler.—The bright warblings of these lovely little birds are to be heard in every garden as they hop and flit about among the small plants and creepers. Some will come to the verandah, and take cheese thrown to them. It is surprising how many birds like cheese. It must be more nourishing than the outer parts of many insects. They nested twice in honeysuckle on a bush-house.

The Variegated-Warbler (*M. lamberti*) of the same genus is fairly numerous, but stays in the wild undergrowth away from houses.

Colluricincla harmonica. Harmonious Shrike-Thrush.—These are very plentiful and are great favourites about the homes. They are

to be seen on the ground or among the trees and plants of every orchard and garden, rarely high even in bush timber. They live on grubs and all kind's of insects, spiders, beetles, small lizards, and have been seen swallowing with some difficulty large centipedes. One bird comes hopping along every day with cheerful confidence on to anyone's hand for cheese, and has been a family pet for a long time. It will hop about us as we lie reading, and sometimes wakes us up early by coming on to our pillows (two of the family sleep outside). This is quite an old bird—a male with chest a clear blue-grey, not streaked like that of the female. Its nest was placed in the young growth from a Casuarina stump about 3 feet from the ground. One young bird only was reared which came to us like the old bird for a while, then disappeared. It had a rufous eyebrow and a generally lighter colour. The rich, harmonious note for which these birds are famous is heard in the nesting season only.

Neesitta chrysoptera. Orange-winged Tree-Runner.—These are plentiful. They go about in little flocks, which give mournful notes as they fly over. They feed, too, in small companies, running along the branches and the tree trunks, usually head downwards, probing with their sharp beaks every little crack and hollow in the bark or wood in their search for insects, and uttering a little "Chip, chip" all the time. One has to observe a little party at work in thick scrub such as Casuarina to see their pretty marking and coloration and their yellow legs and feet. One can get quite close: they are so hungry and so busy, and always seem in such a hurry—going like a flash from one tree to another and displaying as they go the band of colour on the wings, which is bright rufous rather than orange. A pair nested in October and in January (perhaps same pair) high in two eucalypts 20 yards apart in the back paddock. The nest is built on a perpendicular branch usually dead, at a junction, and is difficult to find unless the bird can be followed to it with the eye.

Climacteris leucophaea. White-throated Tree-creeper.—Very numerous, especially in autumn. They live on the same kind of insect food as the *Sittellas* and obtain it in a similar way, creeping up (never down) the tree trunk spirally or winding round the main limbs and suddenly darting away to the base of a neighbouring tree to begin another ascent, often giving loud and shrill piping calls and a pretty, soft, rattle note. Seen closely, they are beautifully marked (female having a clear orange spot near the ear); like the *Sittella* they show the rufous band on wing when they fly. Being rarely on the ground, they are awkward in an unaccustomed place such as the flat side of the bathing pool; on going in, the bird splashes and ducks and gives a loud cry between the splashes, which no other bird does.

Dicaeum hirundinaceum. Mistletoe-Bird.—Though common, this exquisite little bird (the male) is not very frequently seen notwithstanding its bright red breast, being very small and keeping aloft. Its shrill little chirp is often heard from the tree-tops or lower down from the clumps of the parasitic mistletoe (*Loranthus*), whose berries are greedily eaten and look as though they might choke the bird in its efforts to swallow them. It comes down at times into the garden trees in search of small insects—its principal food. A male bird was observed one day for quite a little while hanging by its feet from a clothes line head downwards like an acrobat. The male only has the gorgeous colours, female being inconspicuous and not much seen. The nest is made of light-coloured woolly-looking material obtained from various plants, and is sometimes decorated with small globules of red gum like rubies—a wonderful structure.

Egintha temporalis. Red-browed Firetail.—Very plentiful during April. Commoner than Sparrows. They were all round in flocks and about the garden, where their sibilant whistling was heard all day, and little flocks were flushed where the grass and weeds were long.

Many birds were not mature, being without any red on brow or bill; rump feathers just showing the red. They swarm round the bathing-pool. A party enjoying themselves there on a bright day is a pretty sight. Nests all round; they were still nesting in April.

Honeyeaters (Family *Meliphagidae*) are very numerous. Near the verandah is a Coral-tree (*Erythrina*), from which, when in flower, the varied notes of different birds from the Friar-Bird or the Leatherhead (*Philemon corniculatus*) to the Blood-bird or Crimson Honeyeater (*Myzomela sanguinolenta*) are heard, as they gather honey and insects, and flit hither and thither from blossom to blossom. It is remarkable that, among all the Honeyeaters in the coastal districts of New South Wales there are not many that have pleasing notes. There is no Honeyeater that, as a songster, can be compared with the Rufous Whistler or the Thrush (*C. harmonica*), the Australian Reed-Warbler (*Acrocephalus australis*) or the Jacky Winter. Many have notes that are harsh or discordant—the ejaculations of the Gill Bird or Wattle-Bird (*Acanthochaera carunculata*), the queer talk of the Leatherhead. The bright, insistent whistle of the Spinebill (*Acanthorhynchus tenuirostris*), and the lovely “Tink Tank” notes, now close, now distant, of Bell-Miners (*Manorhina melanophrys*), immortalised by Henry Kendall as being—

“Softer than slumber and sweeter than singing,”

give great pleasure to the ear; but these are the exception.

Melithreptus lunulatus. White-naped Honeyeater.—These are very common, and are here all the year round. Their well-known notes, one plaintive and another with a sort of sucking or lispng sound, are continually heard from the tall gums, where they chiefly live and nest. They come in small parties to the bathing pool, where they are shy and timid, but are not much seen in the flower garden. They obtain their honey from the native trees. Smallish birds, clean-looking and with bright colour contrasts—the black head, the white chest, the bright yellow green upper parts, and the little ring of vermilion about the eye. They are not fruit eaters.

Melithreptus brevirostris. Brown-headed Honey-eater.—This bird is not so common as the White-naped, but is plentiful. It might be said to resemble a White-naped, whose plumage has become very faded and shabby—a little blue about the eye. They are often in small companies in the bush trees and in the garden, where they are very fond of the large blossoms of cannas and *Bignonia grandiflora*. Their commonest note is rather jerky and unmusical. The Black-chinned Honey-eater (*M. gularis*), of same genus, is like an extra big *lunulatus*, with blue instead of vermilion about the eye. It is not common.

Myzomela sanguinolenta. Crimson Honey-eater.—This beautiful little fellow—about the smallest and the brightest in colour of the family—is plentiful roughly from October to February, according to the season—in some years more numerous than in others. Though their diminutive song may often be heard aloft in the eucalypts, the birds themselves are hard to see until they come down to the flowering shrubs in the gardens, where they may nearly always be found on the flowers of the Coral-Tree (*Erythrina*) or Native Bottlebrush (*Callistemon lauceolatus*), both largely grown in gardens.

and both producing big blossoms of a scarlet colour—a good example of protective coloration. Immature birds are sometimes seen with very little scarlet on the back. The female, as in the case of the Mistletoe-Bird, has dull plumage and no song, but a chirp, and is rarely seen unless near her nest. About here they often choose a Turpentine tree (*Syncarpia laurifolia*) or a Sweet Pittosporum (*P. undulatum*) for their nests, which are frequently built very low.

Acanthorhynchus tenuirostris. Spinebill.—This lovely bird is the best-known Honey-eater in the flower gardens. He likes the bright blooms of summer time, and looks very pretty as he flits from plant to plant and gracefully balances or hangs on a flower spike or hovers beside it, while he culls the honey and little insects from the blossom-depths with his long tongue. A pair, perhaps, is on the same stem (the female is the one with duller plumage), and it bends over, maybe to the ground, with their weight. Active and restless and fussy, swift in flight, making a “Frip frup” sound with his rapidly-moving wings as he speeds along, always in a hurry, even his calls—especially the clear whistle, a single note repeated, given “tempo accelerato”—suggest impatience. Not a fruit eater, he is a genuine honey-eater and flower-lover. He often nests in small She-oaks (*Casuarina*).

Meliphaga chrysops. Yellow-faced Honey-eater.—This bird, one of the least attractive of the family to look at, is the most plentiful in these parts, and can always be seen in the native trees or about orchards and gardens. Inveterate orchard-robbers, they place a high value on their services as insect destroyers, when helping themselves to their wages in the form of fruit. In company with the Lewin or Yellow-eared Honey-eaters (*M. lewini*) and Silver-eyes (*Zosterops lateralis*) they do great damage to summer fruits and to apples and pears. These are all so greedy, when busy feeding on the fruit, that one can approach and stand within one or two feet (literally) of them without being noticed.

The Yellow-faced is the most tameable or least wild of the family—the Soldier-Bird or Noisy Miner (*Myzantha garrula*) excepted. Some come for cheese, almost taking it from our hands. A pair fed a young Pallid Cuckoo (*Cuculus pallidus*) four times their size, that took up a position in the nearest peach tree for two days on a liberal diet of cheese crumbs supplied by the household. They are almost as omnivorous as Sparrows, often feeding with them at the scrap-bucket on all kinds of refuse. One had a habit of coming into the kitchen, and was often found on the floor picking up morsels. Here, as elsewhere, they often nest in a bush or creeper quite close to a building. Their note is rather pleasant, but short.

Meliphaga lewini. Yellow-eared or Lewin Honey-eater.—This Honey-eater is common especially in autumn—a finer bird in every way than *M. chrysops*; of a dull darkish green colour and with a large yellow spot by the ear. It is a robber of the orchards when the fruit is ripe, and, like the Oriole (*Oriolus sagittatus*) is very fond of figs. It also feeds on large insects and spiders, for which it will dart in under the verandah. These birds like thick leafy shrubs or trees such as Lillypilly (*Eugenia smithii*) or Sweet Pittosporum (*P. undulatum*) for their nests, which are placed not high in the tree and are fairly large and solid and beautifully lined bottom and sides—often with soft, downy material obtained from the seed cases of various plants. The old birds are very brave and pugnacious when the young ones are in the nest. Their chief call is a prolonged quavering note, rather musical and pretty.

Meliphaga melanops. Yellow-tufted Honey-eater.—These are not very plentiful, but companies are frequently seen—handsome birds with projecting eartufts of a rich golden-yellow and dull yellow crown which sometimes appears to be ruffled. Their hoarse notes are

heard aloft in the eucalypts, where they jump and flit about as though playing some game, and are hard to observe. They come down to the garden sometimes and to the bathing pool. They have not been seen to take fruit. Like the Crimson Honey-eater, they are fond of the Bottle-Bush (*Callistemon*) blossoms, among which, one bright summer's day, eight or ten were to be seen enjoying themselves—a sight to be remembered. They form little settlements, confining themselves to a small area for nesting. A previous season near here, in an area of about three acres, some fifteen nests (all 3 or 4 feet from the ground) were found in the young growth sprouting from the stumps of felled eucalyptus trees. Many of the nests had a little bit of paper fixed in their outer parts—a scrap of newspaper or torn-up letter.

Meliornis nova-hollandiae and *M. nigra*. Yellow-winged and White-checked Honey-eater.—These two fine birds, alike in appearance, habit, and note, often come about in the spring and summer. The White-checked has white about the forehead and particularly the cheeks. Their home is not in timbered country, but in scrub near the sea, about creeks and lagoons, among the Banksias, Callistemons, etc., whence it is not far to the gardens in these suburbs. Both species were to be seen almost every day in summer in a Coral-tree and an Acacia-tree, next to each other and close to some natural scrubby undergrowth. Restless, fussy and selfish and somewhat slow of movement, having feasted on the Coral-tree blossoms, they would move to the Acacia and hop about leisurely, giving their not very pleasing notes, waiting for some excitement—the advent of a brother to be welcomed or a stranger to be hunted. The chief concern seemed to be to keep every other kind of bird out of that tree. They would hasten across and hustle out any innocent Thornbill (*Acanthiza*) or Silver-eye (*Zosterops*) seen on the other side. (It is a transparent tree.) They rarely visit the flower beds and are not fond of fruit. Both species nest not far from the ground in small bushes.

Acanthiza albiventris.—Through the courtesy of the Australian Museum, Sydney, I have recently had the opportunity of examining the type of *Acanthiza albiventris*, North, taken at Dubbo, N.S.W., August, 1876, No. 22917. The species is distinguished from Gould by "rufous chestnut upper tail coverts and lighter under surface." (See "Aus. Mus. Cat.," Nests and Eggs, vol. i., p. 276.) Further and equally important differences have yet to be pointed out. These are the wider tail bar and the lighter tail base of *albiventris*. The colour of the upper coverts ("hazel," according to W. Ridgway's chart) runs well down on the outer webs of the tail feathers, and as these webs are particularly wide, the area so coloured is large. The inner webs of the tail feathers (basal half) are drab tinged with hazel near shaft. These characters of tail and upper coverts cannot be confused with those of *pyrrhopygia*, and constitute in my opinion a separate and distinct species, having a systematic position between *pyrrhopygia*, with the dark tail base and *uropygialis* with light and bright coloured tail base (cinnamon rufous). A coloured figure of what I take to be typical *albiventris* appears in Mathews' "Birds of Australia," vol. ix., plate 447 (1922), bottom figure.—A. G. CAMPBELL, Croydon, Victoria.